Bradbury Building
304 South Broadway
Los Angeles, Los Angeles County
California

HABS No. CAL-334

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
San Francisco, California

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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BRADBURY BUILDING

Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California

ADDRESS: 304 South Broadway

OWNER: Western Management Corporation

OCCUPANTS: Various business and manufacturing concerns

USE: Business

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Bradbury Building, built in 1893, is a fine example of multi-story structure designed around an inner glazed court, with splendid art nouveau iron work in open stairways, open elevator cages and balcony rails. It is a remnant of the Cast Iron Age, which began with the iron bridges in the early half of the 19th century and ended in the last decade of the century when steel framing took over.

It is a lineal descendant of Labrouste's 1858 Bibliotheque Nationale and Eiffel's 1876 Bon Marche' department store, with their exposed iron stairways which were a part of the architectural design, and their glazed roofs. (The roots of iron framing and glazed roofs are, of course, much deeper than the middle of the 19th century.)

The aesthetic quality of the Bradbury Building is largely derived from the superb environment of an inner court flooded with light. It is an early and excellent example of a break with facade architecture and the acknowledgment of the unpleasantness of a busy city street. By treating the inner court as facades, the architect has supplied an off-street leisurely and enriched space which denies the bustle of Broadway and Third Street.

The building is a mecca for architectural students, and because of its dramatic force it is frequently used as a set for motion picture and television films. It is the one pure delight in the old Downtown core.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

In the early 1890's, Louis Bradbury, who had made a fortune in mining in Mexico and was a resident of Los Angeles, decided that he wanted an office building which would reflect his soaring vision of himself. He commissioned Sumner P. Hunt, Architect, to draw up plans. But, when they were completed, Bradbury was dissatisfied, and he offered the job to a young draftsman in Hunt's Office -- George Herbert Wyman.[1,2]

Wyman was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1860. He had no formal education in architecture but was influenced in making it his life work by his uncle, Luther Peters, a builder who had turned designer. In 1878, Luther Peters went into partnership with Philias R. Burns (born in Dayton, Ohio, 1855, died Los Angeles, 1940, at the time of his death a Fellow in the American Institute of Architects) who received his education at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As Luther Peters was older than the 23-year old Burns, and was by 1878 a successful designer and builder, the firm was Peters and Burns. They did a great many public buildings in Dayton in the 70's and 80's.[3]

Wyman worked in the office of Peters and Burns as builder and draftsman for approximately eight years; his health was poor and for periods during this time he was unable to work.[2] However, it seems likely that he was a draftsman on the 1888 Dayton Public Library, a building now demolished, in the South of France Romanesque style. It is also assumed that when Peters and Burns designed from thier Dayton office the early buildings of the National Military Home in Sawtelle, California, that Wyman worked on the plans. Wyman's daughter spoke often of "the buildings papa designed for the Old Soldiers' Home in Sawtelle."

Peters and Burns moved their office to Los Angeles soon after they received the contract to design the early buildings at what is now Veterans' Administration Center, "Sawtelle", Los Angeles.[4] Wyman, soon after Peters and Burns came to Los Angeles, fell ill with pneumonia, and after his recovery he moved his family to his mother-in-law's home in Los Angeles. Wyman was excited by the abundance of flowers in Los Angeles, the trees in leaf in winter, the healing effects of the sun, and was soon strong enough to work again.[2]

The firm of Peters and Burns was dissolved in Los Angeles by that time, and although the two men were associated in the building of

various structures at the National Military Home, Burns was for a while an associate of Sumner P. Hunt, architect for several downtown office buildings in the 80's and 90's. Through this connection, Wyman went to work for Hunt. Wyman was then thirty or thirty-one. He was thirty-two when he accepted Bradbury's offer to design the building at Third and Broadway.

Wyman's conscience troubled him a little in taking the job away from his employer. Bradbury assured Wyman that regardless of whether he accepted the job, it would not go to Hunt. Wyman's daughter reports that one Saturday evening while he was struggling with his conscience he sat at a planchette board (a forerummer of the Ouija board) with his wife; a pencil attached to the board was touched lightly by Wyman and it moved "without conscious effort" on the part of Wyman and spelled out a message from his brother Mark, then dead six years. The message, now in the possession of Wyman's daughter, read: "Take the Bradbury Building. It will make you famous". Whereupon, Wyman accepted the half million dollar Bradbury job.[4]

What puzzles most critics is the conviction of the design, the fine sense of scale, the excellent use of materials in an unorthodox building designed by a relatively inexperienced young man of thirty-two. It is possible that Luther Peters provided Wyman with the clue to the design of the Bradbury Building; Peters spent many months in travel in Europe and his accounts of buildings of cast iron and glass may have excited Wyman. But, Although the central-court concept of the building may not have been Wyman's, the sincerity and boldness of the detailing certainly was. Nothing is accidental about the building; all details work toward a unified whole. What makes it even more unusual is that the Bradbury Building is Wyman's only work of lasting importance.

Some of the later work of Wyman was the Ferguson Building, 301 South Hill Street, Los Angeles, at the foot of Angels' Flight, the Tahoe Building for Bradbury's son, First and Broadway, Los Angeles, and a remodel of the Jonathan Club, Los Angeles. Shortly after the completion of the Bradbury Building, 1893, Wyman enrolled in a correspondence course in architecture, which may account for the fact that from that time on his work became less adventurous. At any rate, the Bradbury Building is still young and vigorous while Wyman's other works have aged without ever having stirred emotion in the viewer.

The architect shows an understanding of drama in the way the interior forms rise to the source of light, and the stairways leap into space,

turn and return again to the rhythm of balconies. Balcony passages give depth and deep shadows to the enclosed space. He shows an understanding of materials in the way he combines marble and cast iron in the stairs, preserving the integrity of each; marble treads slide into openwork metal strings. The rose-colored Italian marble is visible from above and below each step, the light giving it a luminosity. He shows an understanding of detail in the repetition of the rectangular shape of the court in the iron work, the design in the oak paneling in the ceilings of the balconies, and in the webbing of the roof. The relationship between sizes of tile used as paving on the ground floor and balconies is well considered.

There are planned stationary objects, such as the platforms of the landing of the first flight of stairs, which reassure the eye before it makes the leap into the breathtaking space of the open court. There are small observation balconies on which are mail shutes; these appear to be free standing. They relate well to the open metal elevator cages which operate hydraulically. The leisurely pace of the elevators are a part of the larger sense of leisure created by the interior court.

Wyman was devoted to Edward Bellamy's novel "Looking Backward", published in 1887, which describes a typical commercial building in a utopian civilization in the year 2000 as "...a vast hall full of light, received not alone from the windows on all sides but from the dome, the point of which was a hundred feet above...The walls were frescoed in mellow tints, to soften without absorbing the light which flooded the interior."[4]

During construction of the Bradbury Building, the builders ran into an underground spring, and massive steel rails were imported from Europe for use in the foundation.

REFERENCES

1. Los Angeles Times, Clippings in possession of Wyman's daughters, dates unknown.
2. Interviews with daughters of Wyman in 1953 and 1960:
   Mrs. Carroll Ackerman, Fullerton, LA-50523
   Mrs. Louise Hammell, " "
   Forrest Ackerman (grandson), 915 Sharbourne Dr., Los Angeles
3. A Vast Hall Full of Light: The Bradbury Building, by Esther McCoy, Arts & Architecture magazine, April, 1953, p. 20

4. Industrial Advance of Dayton, Ohio, by James P. McKenney, Compiler and Publisher, Published 1889, Dayton, Ohio.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions: 125' on Broadway and 188' on Third Street.

Wall Construction: Steel frame and brick masonry with stone trim. Ground floor, of height to permit mezzanines, is divided for shops, each with its own identification store front of heterogeneous designs. An entablature, at second floor level, forms a base for the architectural motif and the upper floors consisting of a composition of piers with Corinthian caps and pavilians through three stories supporting an attic story crowned with a Corinthian entablature.

Windows: Openings are in rhythms of threes and twos, with square head openings for three stories and arched-heads at attic story, where they are connected by impost and hood mouldings at spring line. The architrave over piers supporting attic story is textured with ornament and the frieze of the crowning entablature is richly sculptured.

Entrances and Doors: Arched entrances with pilasters and entablature of sandstone, bearing inscriptions, on Broadway and Third Street, have deep reveals and lead through vestibules to inner court, where elevators and stairways are situated. Oak doors are double with plate glass panels in upper half. Lunette transoms above doors.

Roof: Composition roof covering over a roof with a pitch, to carry off water, below a clerestory surrounding inner court. The inner court is covered by a hipped skylight of iron webbing filled with glass raised over a clerestory. The divisions of the webbing are elongated rectangles with proportions similar to the first floor court. The trusses supporting the glazed roof are compound Fink trusses with tension members of round rods, which become quite inconspicuous.

Cornice: An entablature with slight projection forming belt courses at second floor level, and a richly ornamented Corinthian entablature with reduced cornice projection at roof.

INTERIOR

Floor Plan: Office spaces, two rooms deep, are built on four sides around an open glazed court; the north corner of the building on the first floor was originally a bank, approximately 30' x 100', extending on the Third Street side of the building back to the Third Street doorway. The plan of the first floor is L-shaped, the glazed roof occurring only on the long leg of the "L". The long leg of the "L" is 15' wide by 85' long; the short leg is 15' wide by 40' long, approximately. The balcony around the second floor is 10' wide at the ends and 15' wide on the sides; on the third and fourth floors the balconies are 10' wide on all four sides. The widening of the court space, as the building rises, gives it a sense of openness as well as increasing the amount of light for the ground floor. The rectangle of the court roof plan is estimated at 50' x 100'. The width of the offices around three sides of the court is 30'. On the southeast corner of the building, the plan extends about 24' beyond the south wall, and on the east side of the building the plan is stepped-in 8' for an approximate width of the glazed roof, apparently to create a side court to light the east-facing offices.

Floors: Tile flooring on ground floor and tile flooring on all balconies. Oak T&G flooring in offices, laid over sub-floor.

Walls: Walls facing the glazed court are masonry; a wainscoting is of raw sienna glazed brick with unglazed buff-colored brick above. There is a base of brown marble veined in gray at all walls facing the court. Offices have oak paneled wainscoting with plaster above, or are entirely of plaster.

Ceilings: Ceilings on the balconies are of paneled oak; in the offices they are plaster.

Doors: All doors facing the court have partial glazing, with transoms above; on the second and third floor the door openings are rectangular and on the fourth floor they are round-headed with lunette transoms. On the first floor most of the doors and wall openings are round-headed. (The openings on the court on all floors are treated as exterior openings) Windows of offices facing the court are glazed to provide cross-lighting for all rooms.

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Stairways: An open cast iron stairway at each end of the building extends out into the court space; the landings and treads are of Italian arabescate marble in brown-peach color, the marble slabs laid into the metal framework. The ornate iron work of the stairway and balcony balustrade is in arabesque design. The module for the railings is 10' from the center line of one 4" round fluted iron Corinthian column to another; the columns are structural, supporting the balconies and the stairways. The architraves and facia have classic mouldings. The columns are capped off just above the balustrade at the top balcony. Handrails are mahagony.

Elevators: Open cage elevators operated hydraulically, with counter-weights in view, serve the north and south sides of the building; a tree of life design in iron extends above the first floor elevator opening to the soffet of the first balcony.

Submitted by,

William Woollett

William Woollett, AIA
AIA Preservation Committee

Prepared by,

Esther McCoy

Esther McCoy

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APPROVED: Charles S Pope DATE: March 1964
Charles S. Pope, AIA
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, Design and Construction
National Park Service

ADDENDUM

Addendum to
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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